

# Electra's lament

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*The scene in Sophocles' tragedy, Electra, where Electra thinks that her brother Orestes is dead, even though he is standing, disguised, in front of her, is not just theatrically effective, but tells the audience a great deal about Orestes' character, and especially about Electra's state of mind.*

One of the most famous scenes in Greek tragedy is the episode two-thirds of the way into Sophocles' *Electra*, in which the disguised Orestes, representing himself as a messenger from Phocis, presents to his sister Electra the funeral urn which supposedly contains his own ashes. Neither the brother nor the sister recognises the other: Electra has been persuaded in an earlier scene by the long account of the Delphian games in which her brother perished in a catastrophic chariot accident; Orestes, seeing a young woman dressed like a slave, does not suspect that this is in fact his sister, subjected to humiliation and denied her proper standing by her mother and Aegisthus.

## Who is that masked man?

The scene involves a double recognition; Orestes finally reveals himself, to his sister's astounded delight; but he himself has become aware of her identity much earlier, during the memorable speech in which she holds the urn and speaks, as she supposes, to her dead brother's remains – all the time unaware that the living man stands before her, full of pity and distress as he realizes who she is and gazes at her in her despair.

The scene, as I said, is a famous one, and has offered scope to famous actors. Later ancient authors told of the virtuosos performance by the actor Polos in the fourth century B.C., who played the part of Electra and carried an urn which was said to contain the ashes of his own dead son (though one wonders how the audience could have been sure of this, any more than Electra in the play!). But it is also an unexpected scene, and here I shall discuss why it is surprising and why it is nevertheless so effective.

Since Orestes is supposed to be dead, he must reveal at some point that this report was greatly exaggerated, and who better to get the good news than his sister? But Sophocles did not need to make him fail to recognise his Electra; at the very start of the play he had heard a woman crying out in distress and wondered if the voice was hers. There is some need for haste, as the killing of Clytemnestra should be accomplished before Aegisthus comes home. Yet the scene goes on for a hundred lines (almost 50 of them occupied by Electra's long speech of grief and despair over the urn) before Orestes finally brings the matter to a head and puts her out of her misery. So why does Orestes, or Sophocles, prolong the agony?

## All about my sister

The earlier tragedian Aeschylus had covered some of the same ground in *Libation-bearers*, the central play of the *Oresteia*. There, recognition takes place early on, and without undue delay; Electra is never subject to the deception that ensnares her mother, the pretence that Orestes has died. But in *Libation-bearers* Electra is important only in the first half of the play: after that she vanishes from the action and is never referred to again. Sophocles (like Euripides) clearly saw the opportunity to develop this part.

As the title suggests, the *Electra* is above all about Electra – her isolation, her sufferings, her hatred of her mother, her hostility to her weak and submissive sister Chrysothemis, her disappointed hopes of marriage (Aegisthus and Clytemnestra keep her virtually a prisoner), and above all her longing for her brother's return. Earlier in the play we are told that her mother and Aegisthus are planning to consign her to a living tomb: the motif of burial alive recalls *Antigone*. Sophocles has done everything possible to emphasize the pathos and misery of his heroine. She and her emotions dominate the play; she sings or speaks far more than any other character. To show us what her brother means to her the playwright shows her reactions to losing him.

## Odysseus and Orestes in disguise

Another way to understand this scene is through literary history, going back as far as the *Odyssey*. Electra is in a similar position to Odysseus' wife Penelope. In the second half of the epic, when the hero returns to Ithaca, he spends several days in disguise as an aged beggar, preserving his secret identity even in the presence of his wife. In a famous sequence in book 19, he maintains his iron self-control even when Penelope breaks down into a flood of tears on hearing his false news of Odysseus.

Not content with that, in the last book Odysseus also deceives his father Laertes, and Laertes too breaks down in despair in reaction to a lying tale, which leads him to suppose that his son is now dead. There the deception is even more outrageous, since the slaughter of the suitors has already taken place; it seems that Odysseus is unable to resist the temptation to pull the wool over his father's eyes before finally revealing the more cheerful truth. This behaviour suits the crafty Odysseus, always preening himself on his own cleverness (though when he sees his father collapse in misery he is dismayed and takes swift steps to remedy the situation). It may seem less appropriate to Orestes, and Sophocles has softened the scene by making clear at the start that the young man does not realize his sister's identity. But more important is the broader implication of these Odyssean scenes.

Greek audiences obviously relished ironic situations of this kind, where one or more party is in the dark, and where good news *could* be revealed right away (voluntarily or accidentally), thus bringing the suspense to an end, but instead the climax is deferred. Euripides has some even more elaborate and extended examples, especially in the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, in which Orestes and his sister Iphigenia meet in foreign parts, each believing that

## The family history

When he returned from the Trojan War, Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover (and his cousin) Aegisthus. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's daughter, Electra, sent her young brother, Orestes, away to safety in Phocis, but was herself punished for her continued devotion to her dead father by ill-treatment from his murderers. When Orestes grew up, he returned with his friend Pylades and his tutor, to avenge his father's murder by killing Aegisthus and his own mother, Clytemnestra, as he had been commanded to by the god Apollo.

the other is dead! In the central scene of that play we constantly expect one or both parties' identity to be revealed by questioning, but the exchange goes on for hundreds of lines without this happening.

### Ain't over till the sad lady sings

The scene in the *Electra*, then, allows the dramatist and the audience to have their cake and eat it; they can wallow in the almost operatic intensity of Electra's grief, while remaining comfortably aware at the back of their minds that there is imminent relief at hand. Orestes' motive is less important and certainly less clear. If we like, we can assume that he is so overcome with distress at his sister's condition that he is temporarily dumbstruck. But that is probably to apply too realistic a standard of characterization to the Greek stage. What matters in this scene is Electra's self-torturing monologue – for it is a monologue, despite the presence on stage of the chorus, Orestes, and the silent extra playing his friend Pylades. During the long speech, she is preoccupied with the urn, and no longer conscious of the others present – irony again, as she focuses on an inanimate object rather than the living figure of her actual brother, close by her side for the first time in years.

What about the speech itself? A close reading, whether in Greek or English, can tell us a lot about Sophocles' dramatic technique. I offer only a few examples here, but it is worth your while looking for more.

### The saddest words of tongue or pen

Lamentation naturally exploits the contrast between past and present, and also between what might or should have been, and what actually has come to pass. Both these contrasts are present in the first part of Electra's lament. In Sophocles' version, she is the one who sent her brother off to safety abroad. Now she has to recognise that this only led to her never seeing him again, for he died in a foreign land. She ought to have been with him in his last moments: instead, his body was cared for by strangers. The pathos of their separation at the time of his death is intensified by her insistence that she was especially close to him, she paid him special attention in his infancy, 'delightful labour'.

*For you were never your mother's darling more than  
mine  
nor was any in the house your nurse rather than I,  
and I was the one you always called 'sister'.*

Aeschylus in his version had included a short scene in which Orestes' nurse, an old slave-woman, expressed her unaffected grief at the news of his death, complaining to the chorus about Clytemnestra's crocodile tears and declaring that she, not the boy's mother, had always been his wet-nurse. Here Sophocles creatively adapts that scene, replacing the homely though touching reminiscences of the nurse with the deeper, more heartbroken grief of a bereaved sister. Aeschylus' trilogy seems to have achieved its classic status early, and there were revivals of his dramas later in the fifth century; so many of the audience may well have recognised the allusion. Allusive ingenuity is not incompatible with tragic intensity.

### The beat my heart skipped

Perhaps the most powerful moment of all in the speech is the place where the metrical structure breaks down; instead of the regular lines of spoken verse we have three fragmented lines that do not cohere with the surrounding rhythms.

*oimoi moi.  
o demas oiktron. pheu pheu.  
o deinotatas, oimoi moi...*

*O misery!  
o piteous form. oh, oh!  
on the most terrible of paths – o misery –  
(have you been sent...)*

With the next line the syntax resumes normality, the versification stabilizes. Clearly Sophocles is disrupting the normal metre to represent Electra breaking down into uncontrollable sobs. There are other places in his work where exclamations outside the metre are used to mark emotional turmoil, but none in so painful a context.

From this point on the speech moves to talk of Electra's own death ('take me, who am nothing now, into nothingness'): for she supposes that only by her joining him in death can they be re-united. The dialogue which follows this speech will reveal to her that this step would be unnecessarily drastic. The *Electra* is in many ways a dark and disturbing play: the heroine is shown as a woman who has suffered, perhaps one who is damaged psychologically. But the speech over the urn shows her more positive and loving side, and the recognition which ensues offers her some ecstatic moments of unexpected happiness. Whether the longer-term prospects for the heirs of Agamemnon are as positive is a question on which audiences are unlikely ever to reach agreement.

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